

## **His Greatest Fear** by dontburnthewitch

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**Summary:** Halloween can still be scary, for both Will and Mike.

## His Greatest Fear

Max crossed her legs, joining the others on the blanket pile in Mike's basement. It was Halloween and they explicitly chose not to go trick-or-treating. Maybe it was the events of the previous year or maybe it was the fact they were *high-schoolers* now. Either way, they decided that staying in was for the best. It was far too cold outside this year anyways.

Right now, the Party sat arranged in a loose circle upon the mound of throws and pillows. The Wheelers gave them a large bowl of candy to share, which they placed directly in the middle. Originally they planned to catch the late-night movie marathon on Mike's new basement television (which was really just the old one from upstairs), but they wound up way too distracted by each other's company. Monochrome films flickered in the background while they popped candy corn and chocolates into their mouths.

"Okay guys, big question," Max looked around at her friends. "What's the scariest thing you can think of?"

"A werewolf!" Dustin said immediately, his eyes lighting up like he'd just solved a trivia question.

"Really, man? A werewolf?" Lucas threw his hands in the air. "Is that the best you can come up with?"

"Two werewolves, then," Dustin said. "And I'd like to see you do better."

"Serial killers," Lucas said.

"Are we talking like Michael Myers or Freddy Krueger?"

"Does it matter?"

"Uh... yeah!" Dustin said. "First of all, Freddy Krueger has dream powers, okay? He can do anything he wants so he's way scarier. Michael Myers is just a dude in a mask."

"Yeah. A *crazy* dude in a mask with a *knife*."

Max leaned in, "To be fair, that Freddy Krueger guy has four knives all on one hand."

Dustin pointed to her and raised his brows at Lucas. "See?" he said.

"What about you, Max?" Lucas asked.

Max thought about it for a moment before saying, "Being stuck in an elevator - all alone. With the power out."

"But that's not really scary, that's just boring," Mike interjected. "What's gonna hurt you in an elevator?"

"Oh, so I guess we could just stick you in a tiny dark metal box and you'd be perfectly fine, right?" Max said.

Mike shrugged. "Yeah, probably," he said.

"So what does scare you?" Max asked.

Mike knew the answer. He didn't want to say it. It'd spoil the evening. He fidgeted, wringing his hands and quietly popping the joints in his fingers. El, lounging in his lap, took notice of this and smacked his hands. Pursing his lips, Mike came up with a fib.

"Heights," he said.

It wasn't entirely untrue. Of course high places made him uneasy. That seemed to be fairly standard for most people. Like a primal fear that snaked its way down the evolutionary chain. In fact, if he had to list the scariest moments in his life, standing on the cliff's edge at Sattler's Quarry ranked pretty far up there. Still, it paled in comparison to his true number one.

Max nodded, "Fair enough. How about you, El... uh, Jane?"

El didn't say anything. She twirled a bubblegum wrapper around, smacking its contents loudly between her teeth. She blew an enormous bubble and let it burst. Everyone knew her answer already.

Before Max could move on, Lucas stopped her.

"Don't ask Will," he said.

Will sat up. "Why not?" he asked.

"Because we know what you're gonna say," Lucas explained. "And anyways we shouldn't upset you like that."

"I can handle it," Will insisted. "Try me."

"Okay, Will. What's the scariest thing you can think of?" Max asked.

Will's face was dead serious before suddenly cracking into a barely contained grin.

"Being stuck in a room with Dustin after he eats a bean burrito," he giggled. "And the door is locked from the outside!"

"Hey!" Dustin shouted. He picked a lollipop out of the candy bowl and chucked it at Will. It bounced off the boy's head. He was still laughing.

The basement door cracked open. Mrs. Wheeler's head poked into view.

"Jane! Max! Chief Hopper is here to give you a lift home," she shouted. "And boys, keep it down!"

"Yes, mom!" Mike called back up.

Max rolled her eyes and threw her jacket on. "Billy's probably gonna be super drunk when I get back. Wish me luck," she said, kissing Lucas's forehead and stomping up the stairs. Likewise, Mike said goodbye to El while she joined Max on her way out.

The four boys - the "original" Party - were left there in the basement. Almost sixteen and still having sleepovers. Mike figured it probably looked silly to his parents. He really wasn't thrilled about them nagging him to find a job. Frustrated as it made him, his mom and dad just couldn't understand the monumental level of bullshit he and his friends had gone through for the past two years. It was like they'd missed out on a good chunk of their adolescence, and now they were playing catch-up.

Will and El took the brunt of it, obviously. El toughened up and got over it fast. She had all sorts of other things to worry about. She had years of schoolwork to make up, social conventions to learn, and a ton of angry music to get her through it. Being around Will, on the other hand, was like treading around broken glass. To Mike's knowledge Will hadn't experienced any panic attacks for months, but they lingered threateningly just beyond the veil of normalcy.

As the night progressed, Dustin fell into a candy coma. He didn't even change into his pyjamas. He just groaned and rolled over into the pillow pile, and fell asleep. In the time the other three took to switch into their sleepwear, his trucker hat fell in front of his eyes and he began to violently snore.

"Stop hogging the blanket, dumbass," Lucas hissed at him, tugging at the cover Dustin currently had bundled in his arms. "It's cold down here. Are you gonna make me freeze to death?"

Dustin muttered something and tossed a meagre portion of the blanket to Lucas. In turn, Lucas grumbled and laid down uncomfortably close to his friend just to get some warmth.

On the other end of the pile, Mike propped up a pillow and tried to get comfortable. Usually he preferred to sleep with the lights out, but he knew that Will couldn't do that. Instead, he buried his face in the blankets until it was dark enough for his liking.

"Mike, I'm just going to the bathroom," Will whispered. Mike felt him get up and he heard the bathroom door swing closed.

Will had only been gone for a couple minutes when a sudden shriek split the air.

Mike shot up. For a moment, he was confused. He couldn't see anything. The basement was pitch-black. His eyes were still trying to adjust to the darkness.

"Wh... what was that?" Lucas mumbled.

"Power went out," Mike said.

"Was that Will?"

"I think so. I'll deal with it."

His words came out so calm compared to how fast his heart was beating. He scrambled towards the bathroom door, tripping over a stack of empty soda cans in the process.

He rattled the doorknob. Locked.

"Will?" he said. "Will, are you okay?"

No response. He started to panic.

His hand slapped around in the dark. He found the coffee table and his fingers curled around a pen. With his teeth, he pulled out the ink tube. It was just small enough to fit in the knob's lock. He jammed it in and with a click, the door swung open.

Dim amounts of light pooled into the bathroom. Mike's pulse slowed momentarily. Will was there. He was safe.

But he sat huddled beside the toilet. Trembling hands clutched at his knees. As Mike approached, he saw tears streaking his friend's red cheeks. He didn't waste any time in rushing over to him.

"Hey," he said, gently placing his hands on Will's upper arms. "It's okay. It's just a blackout."

Will wasn't having any of it. He kept shaking his head and drawing in rapid breaths. Hiccups broke through. He pinched his eyes shut, forcing tears to tumble onto his shirt.

Mike slumped onto the floor next to him. He moved Will into an embrace, resting the boy's head against his shoulder.

"It's alright," he said while tracing soothing circles into Will's back with his palm. "You're okay. Everything's fine."

"No. It's n-not f-f-fine..." Will choked. Abruptly, he pushed Mike away. "I hate this," he continued. "I'm not a baby, Mike. Stop pretending I'm so delicate, okay? I c-can do this on my own."

Will stood, quickly washed his hands, and stomped out the door.

Mike was left dumbfounded. He heard voices distantly from the rec room.

"You alright?"

"I'm fine, Lucas."

"Mmm... huh?"

"Dustin, go back to sleep."

A thousand thoughts tumbled through Mike's mind. Conversation starters. Apologies. He certainly didn't want to infantilize Will. The kid was a grown independent teenager and being babied was the last thing someone like that needed. Guilt flooded into his chest.

Furthermore, a sense of frustration took root. How did Will not understand? Did Mike's moments of panic mean nothing? Any number of horrible things could have happened to Will. Sure, the power had gone out and it could've been as simple as that. But at this point, Mike was willing to suspend his disbelief for the supernatural and its more sinister elements. Who knows what breed of untold horrors threatened to break through and steal Will again?

Mike should've felt angry at him. He should've yanked Will's arm and pulled him to eye-level to talk some sense into him. Though, underneath Will's sudden bitter façade, he was still hurting in a variety of ways Mike could scarcely understand. And grasping at the enormity of the trauma sent Mike's brain spinning. He didn't know how Will felt. He couldn't know. But he absolutely knew enough that he wasn't feeling sorry for his friend. *Feeling sorry* was for people whose neighbour's dog died. It was a state of feigned concern designed for condolence cards and gift baskets. Mike couldn't fathom having such an empty feeling for Will, and frankly he felt insulted that Will perceived it that way.

He crept back out to the rec room. Will was bundled up and facing Dustin's direction when Mike came to join his friends. He slid into the covers on Will's other side, laying on his back and glaring at the ceiling. He knew Will wasn't asleep, and wasn't going to be anytime soon. Not until the lights came back on.

Soft shuddering breaths came from Will, strained by hurt and annoyance. Mike went to go pat his back. His hand was within inches of Will when he thought better of it. Instead, he continued to listen to the quiet sounds his friend made, searching for any sign that Will was calming down. It didn't happen. And after several minutes of listening and examining Will's state, Mike spoke up.

"I'm sorry," he whispered. "I didn't mean to make you feel like that."

"Well, you did."

"I know."

Will sighed and rolled over to face Mike. The puffiness had faded from his face and the redness in his eyes had begun to recede. His gentle features were outlined by the subdued glow coming in from the street lamps outside the basement windows.

Mike took a deep breath. "You want to know what I'm scared of most?" he asked.

"Hmmm?" Will wasn't making eye contact.

Mike shifted closer to his friend. "I still have nightmares about it. All the time," he said.

"About what?"

"Them dragging your body out of the water," Mike replied, suddenly finding himself struggling to keep his voice from breaking. "Seeing you all tied up with something... *evil* inside you. Watching you scream in a hospital bed attached to all these machines everywhere."

Will's eyes came to meet his.

"I don't need you to pity me," he said. "I don't need you to think I'm weak. Everyone else already does."

"I don't pity you, Will," Mike said definitively. "And I don't think you're weak. You're the strongest person I know. But I'm not strong, Will. I can't be, knowing you could just disappear again. And maybe this time you won't come back." He sniffed and fought against the



heat welling up behind his eyes. "I'm not trying to baby you. I'm just... scared."

Will scanned his face and his expression softened. Mike hoped it was because he understood. He didn't get a reply. Will just looked distantly into him while their eyelids began to fall.

"Are you going to be okay sleeping in the dark?" Mike asked.

"I'm... not sure."

Will rolled onto his back, gazing up into the ceiling and the rafters that held up the main floor. The boards creaked, echoing through the otherwise silent Wheeler house. He sighed, still unable to stop himself from shivering uncomfortably.

That's when Mike wiggled next to him. He came to rest his head on Will's shoulder and threw an arm around him. His shirt rode up and Mike's elbow made contact with the icy cold skin on Will's belly.

"You're warm," Will mumbled.

"Need me to come closer?"

"Please."

Mike shuffled close enough to tangle their legs together. His nose brushed Will's neck and he sent warm breaths tracking over his friend's collar. Will hummed in contentment.

"I think I can sleep," Will said. "If we stay like this."

"Of course."

Mike squeezed Will tight and snaked his hand between Will's ribs and arm. In the process, he must have nudged the boy sleeping next to them because Dustin rolled over and yawned.

"Hey," Dustin said in a bleary voice. "Did you bring enough Byers to share with the rest of the class?"

Dustin pulled himself close to Will, criss-crossing his arm over Mike's.

And then, Will found himself with two faces pressed close to his own  
- though Dustin quickly lapsed back into snores.

"Are you still scared?" Mike asked.

"No," Will replied.

"I'm glad."